

WRITERSMOSAIC

Basma Ghalayini

In Conversation with John Siddique

'And I would tell someone, 'Oh, I'm from Palestine.' 'Oh, is that—do you mean Israel? Oh, where is that?' And people wouldn't know. And I was in shock because in my head, *how could you not know where Palestine is?* Given what's going on, surely everyone will know.'

— Basma Ghalayini

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. John Siddique talks to Basma Ghalayini about her journey from working in IT to editing the anthologies *Palestine +100* and *Palestine -1*.

[Music]

John Siddique (JS): Hi, Basma. Thank you for welcoming me into your home. And it's just really lovely to be here with you. You've edited this really beautiful book, *Palestine -1*, recently. And it's interesting, a couple of days—we're recording, and it's just a couple of days before Nakba Day. It's a rainy day in Manchester, indeed. And it'd be really lovely to talk to you about your artistic journey and journey as an editor and putting this book together. And because we're going to centre on this book, I'd really love it if you would just share a little bit of the intro with me for our listeners, so that we can get a feeling for it.

Basma Ghalayini (BG): Yes, thank you for having me and any chance, really, to talk about Palestine for me. So, I'll start with a bit of a read.

[BG reads from *Palestine -1*]

Through 77 years of occupation, violence, displacement, and repeated collective punishment, Palestinians have never stopped running. Not just from the soldiers on their streets, the drones and F35s in their skies, the warships in their seas, the informants in their midst, or the world's most

technologically-advanced, politically-impervious military state bearing down on all sides, but from an idea, a century-old myth, a fantasy: that you can spread a map out on a table somewhere and simply invent a country, regardless of what already exists there. It's a European fantasy, of course. This particular one being the brainchild of Theodor Herzl, an atheist Jewish journalist from Budapest, who sought to heal 'the wound' of antisemitism in Europe by creating a completely new Jewish homeland.

Through a lifetime of lobbying and organising, Herzl put various proposals for such a state – including Lord Chamberlain's later-abandoned 'Uganda Scheme' – onto the European political agenda, that is to say, onto politicians' tables. Herzl wasn't the only European to indulge in table-top fantasies, of course. In late 1915, when British and French diplomats Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot sat down at tables in London and Paris and secretly drew straight lines through lands that didn't belong to them, and through lives that they would never know, dividing the spoils of the Ottoman empire between three other empires, they too were indulging in a fantasy: one that would soon (if briefly) cohere with Herzl's. The new British colony of Mandatory Palestine would need partners on the ground, proxies to eventually take on the dirty

work; and two years after the Sykes-Picot agreement was ratified, the British found their proxy, their co-fantasists, in the Zionists. When Lord Balfour scribbled his famous 1917 'declaration' – a document with no legal or moral basis – green-lighting the creation of a new country for a community that at that time only made up five per cent of the population on the ground, it was yet another exercise in fantasy world-building.'

JS: Thank you so much. I just want to thank you for this intro, quite honestly. I was reading it and just thought with the level of obscurity that goes on around Palestine, how great it was to actually have something short, like a Cliff Notes version of the history, basically, and just what an amazing piece of work the intro is on its own. As well as introducing us to the authors in the book, it is just such a refreshing thing to read because you try to find out how things have come to be, and unless you actually really work at it, it's very, very difficult. Most people don't get access or have the time or the—maybe even the inclination to find out where things have come from. We live in a very shallow world these days, where people don't dig any deeper very much, I feel sometimes. And yeah, so just a wonderful intro. And I love this tabletop fantasies of world building concept. Where did that come from for you? How did that image come up?

BG: It starts with the way the book started, really. Just before the genocide, me and the series editor, Ra Page, and we were discussing what our next book could be after *Palestine +100*, which *Palestine +100* was set in the future. And we thought it would be good to have 10 Palestinian writers talk about the village they came from through a horror story and build the world around that village that they came from through the lens of horror, really. And that's really where the idea came from, just world building, which we did touch upon in *Palestine +100* and want to continue to do so in *Palestine -1*. So, each village in the book, each writer in the book talks about their village through a world that they created in that story.

JS: And it's just such an effective thing. That's it. I was just so surprised, actually. And I wanted to talk about the book a bit later and talk about your journey first, but we've started on the book first, so we'll do that. That's okay. It's absolutely fantastic. And then we'll look at your journey, as it were. I think there's 12 authors in the book, isn't there, it ends up with? And besides horror, what really surprised me is that we also have mythological, magic realism, and fantasy and horror and almost that eschewing of the documentary in a way, yet there's still no way to avoid what one is talking about. And one or two of the stories I found very—anything around Palestine is very difficult to take in, especially if you're a global majority person from a country that had been

occupied or colonised or—and so on. So, for example, there's a story based on the murder, the killing, the slaughter, of Hind Rajab and her family. That was such a difficult—

BG: 'Trapped' by Anwar Hamed.

JS: Yeah, such a difficult thing. And yet, there's this time-shifting thing that the author does, which is really quite incredible, actually. Could you share with us a little bit about those kind of approaches within the book?

BG: This particular story, Anwar Hamed wrote in the previous book, *Palestine +100*. It was meant to be science fiction, but it ended up being slightly horror in the previous story, in the previous book. With this one, we thought we'd ask him to write for us again because he's from the West Bank, and he has a very deep knowledge of Palestine, so he was born and lived in the West Bank, moved to the UK. And he wrote about the village of Tantura, where there was a massive massacre that occurred. It was horrendous and one of the massacres that's not very much spoken about like other massacres. It was on the sea. But towards the end of it, the men in the village were

made to bury their own dead in the sand. And it was just absolutely horrendous. So, what he did was he did a time-shifting thing, or I think it was more a metamorphosis thing. So, we've got one character who moves within bodies of her ancestors. So, she first started as a little girl, and then in the 2023 current time, and then she moves again to the '90s in her mother's body, then her grandmother's body, who witnessed the Tantura massacre. And what he did was he's just facing the demons of the past in a way. I mean, you have to—obviously, I don't want to spoil it, but the time-shifting element, for me, I found pretty—I actually was in tears reading this story when it first came in. And because of how powerful Hind Rajab's story was, he goes into vivid detail about that particular scene, but also going back. And there's a theme throughout the story with the hair braids. I mean, that story is quite haunting, really.

JS: Yeah, it's incredible. Absolutely incredible. And there's another one that really stuck out for me, which is, 'I Swear This All Happened' by Liana Badr. And this is that we have a duplicate in the underworld. So, we're in the mythic and the symbolic way of storytelling. Absolutely incredible.

BG: Liana touched on a bit of folklore, Palestinian or Arab folklore, where it's said that every person has a duplicate who makes them do bad things. And she touched upon

this in a very clever way because she also mentioned a school of girls who are all orphaned girls from the massacre of Deir Yassin. And they're all in a school, and they're all discussing this potential existence of a ghoul or a duplicate that makes you do bad things. She uses it in the context of every Palestinian village being erased and then turned into an Israeli village or an Israeli town and that being some form of duplicate, also wondering if the Israelis have duplicates or the IDF have duplicates that make them do those bad things. So, she used it on many levels. And she also talked about the massacre of Deir Yassin and all the bigger context of the orphans who were in those schools. So, she touched upon a lot of subjects. And then the bigger context of the diaspora because her story spans, again, over a few years, because first they are students at school, and then as grown ups, they're all scattered into different areas in the Arab world, and they meet up and talk about it. So, yeah, she used that theme, and it was, again, quite haunting.

JS: Yeah. And then there's the stories of dragons. Dragons pop up a few times as well. And I found that really interesting too, that this dragon theme comes. There's one story that's specifically about dragons. There's another story where it opens with this image of these dragons. It made me—I got to thinking if I was to give this interview with you a title, I was going to call it something like 'The art of editing the impossible'. And I guess if

we were to sit down with this group of beautiful writers, it's 'The art of writing the impossible'. Can't imagine the commission coming, 'Can you write a piece about Palestine?', how you'd even tackle that. So, to take this speculative fiction, for want of better words, approach it just seemed to be a very wise way to take this on.

BG: Yeah. I tell you, I was very surprised as to how—surprised and also not surprised because Palestine, for us as Palestinians, is very close to the surface. It's on the surface. It's just there. So, you ask someone, a writer, to write about Palestine, it will happen very quickly, very naturally, because that's all we ever think about. That's what we are. It runs in our veins. Our identity is we are Palestinian, that's all we think about all the time. And we do it—we apply it at our work, with our children, our homes. So, as writers, I was surprised, but also not surprised, as to how—surprised because like you said, the genre was a bit different to what they're used to, but not surprised because they're Palestinians and it just came, it just flowed. There was very little editing involved in the stories. I mean, they all came very ready and well-written and to the point. So, there's that element of things. But also with the genre, it also helps process. Each of those writers will be writing from personal experience, so they'll all have—they'll all be processing their identity and processing their relationship with Palestine. And so, the

writing would have been like a balm, like just a way for them to process their own lives and relationship with Palestine and being Palestinian.

JS: Does the mythic or the—I don't want to say speculative, but the mythic and poetic, is that then very much in the Palestinian literary blood?

BG: Yeah, we have a very rich folklore and very rich tapestry, as it were, of fables and stories that our grandmothers would tell us about certain things that would happen if, I don't know, if you ate too fast or what happened to certain villagers in certain places, places in Gaza. There's just loads of folklore, and they use that to write those stories. One of the things that, me personally, doesn't bother me, it's just I wish it was different, is that there's a lot of heavy associations between Palestine, the Palestinian cause, and religion, Islam, the Islamic religion. And that kind of overshadows a lot of other elements of Palestinian community and the Palestinian culture, which is this kind of culture, the peasant culture or the city culture, the Christian culture, there are all those other elements of our lives that are not talked about. And one of them being we do have our own superstitions and our stories and all those things that happen in our daily life that aren't related to religion. And I thought this book was a good way to highlight that.

JS: I think we need more of this, quite honestly. I mean, I just really think we need more of this. And I wish—I really want your book to be much more seen, especially when you see a title like *Palestine -1*, and you think, *God, this is going to be hard going*, you know? And it is hard going, but not in the way you think it is because that weaving of myth and the jinn story and the shadow world and the mythic, it just makes—it gives everybody 3D again. It takes you out of what the news presents us and gives life back.

BG: Yeah, it shows all the elements that make us who we are. Just like there are other elements in other communities, there are a lot of elements in Palestinian communities and Palestinian people that make us who we are. And like you said, it's very one dimensional what we think a Palestinian is or Palestine is. And these books help, like you said, turn the people into people that are relatable, or not even relatable, just it gives them all other elements of who they are.

JS: Absolutely, yeah. It's quite amazing, that reductive property of propaganda, [laughs] as it were. As a child, I traveled with my father, and my whole family, actually, we traveled right the way across the East. And I can remember being a child in Iran and Iraq and Afghanistan. And then I see representations of it on the news, and my child

self is like, *no, no, that's not what it's like*. And so this, to me, was like a drink of water, quite honestly, after that desert of propaganda. So, absolutely fantastic. So, I wanted to ask you about your own journey, becoming an editor, and your own creative journey. So, I'd love it if you'd share with us what your journey has been with becoming an editor and translator.

BG: Yeah, I don't get to talk about this much, actually. It did happen—it wasn't something I set off to be. It happened by, I'd say, maybe coincidence. I mean, I could—

JS: What did you set off to be? Well, so I was born in Palestine, lived in Gaza until I was 26, 27. And at university, I did software engineering. And then I came to the UK to do further studies on system management, all things that had nothing to do with art or nothing to do with literature. But because I spoke both languages, I would do quite a bit of translation just on the side or to make a bit of money. And that was my door. Now, that coincided with me coming to the UK and being in complete shock of how little people knew about Palestine. See, I came from Gaza. And when I arrived, I thought, *okay, I'll just tell people I'm from Palestine. They'll know exactly what I'm talking about. Who doesn't know Palestine?* And I would tell someone, 'Oh, I'm from Palestine.' 'Oh, is that—do you mean Israel? Where is that?' And people wouldn't know. And I was

in shock because in my head, *how could you not know where Palestine is?* Given what's going on, surely everyone will know. So, it's quite a steep learning curve for me that I had to explain to people what was going on and then realising how misrepresented the news was.

I started doing freelance translation, and it happened to—some of it happened to be with Comma. I met Ra through one of the writers of *[The] Book of Gaza*. And then I started working for Comma on a freelance basis, after which Ra was doing, or Comma Press were doing, a series called *The +100*, the first one being *Iraq +100*. And then me and him just thought, *wouldn't it be a good idea to do Palestine +100?* And, *who can edit it?* I thought I'd edit it because we just had a lot to think about, a lot to talk about. And I had a lot—I was so frustrated. I took out so much in that intro because I thought, *how do people not know this?* Nobody ever asks why when it comes to Palestine. Nobody ever asks why. They see what's going on now. No one's ever – I meet a lot of people – no one's ever sat down with me or come to me and said, 'Can you please tell us more? Explain this, explain that.' Nobody. I don't know if people are shy or if they feel awkward around me. I don't understand. But I wish someone would just—I obviously encourage people to do their own research as well, but all the information is just so biased and geared toward the pro-Israel and the Zionist narrative. I just want someone to sit down

and say, 'So, tell us why this particular thing happens. Tell us why these particular resistance groups exist. What are they resisting against? Why did all this come to be?' Nobody ever asked. So, I thought it would be a good idea in that book, in *Palestine +100*, to take that all out in the intro. And also, the stories would help give context. And that was how my editing, my first editing role, came to be. I also do a lot of work on the Arabic titles within Comma. That's a whole other element of my job.

JS: What do you see the key elements of being an editor to be?

BG: In my experience with those two books, my role was—there was a big translation role because a lot of the stories came in Arabic and were translated to English. So, I would look over the translations, make sure none of the idioms are lost and the nuances of the language and the accents, because a lot of writers would write in the colloquial, native accent that they—from whatever village they came from. So, I'd oversee that. Also the context. I would find most of the writers. I'd find them and communicating with them and just making sure that a lot of the elements of Palestine, being Palestinian, existed in the stories and they covered a lot of concepts that, as a Palestinian, I'd like to be covered.

So, for example, with *Palestine +100*, the series editor, who was Ra, oversaw a lot of the science fiction elements, which are not my strong suit. I was more the Palestinian element of the book. Same with this one. In terms of the genre, the horror of it, Ra would oversee the horror element and where all of those elements fell within a story. I oversaw the Palestine element because I'm so passionate about, like you said, a Palestinian book being out there that's not about religion and or Hamas or any of the other things. It's just about being a Palestinian. Everyone's unique experience and their relationship with Palestine.

I was driving down, I don't know, I think the Mancunian Way the other day, and there is a building being demolished, one of the Manchester Metropolitan University buildings. And my son looked out the window and said, 'Oh, look, it looks like Gaza.' And I thought even my son's association, who he visited Gaza in 2022 and knows how beautiful it is and the beaches, now even he has this association of rubble, *oh, look, must be something from Gaza*. And that association, I—obviously, it is happening, but it's not all that Palestine or Gaza is. It's not. And it's not what I want people to think—to associate Palestinians with because then it's much more than that.

And there's this whole element of idealisation that I don't—I'm not saying I'm offended by it, I just wish it would be different. Palestinians, they're not heroes, they're not angels, they're just humans. They're flawed, massively flawed. Like when, I don't know, let's say that some looting happens in Gaza post genocide, they're like, 'Oh, my God, how can Gazans do this?' It's a country being occupied; people need to survive somehow. There's a lot of it. Why are you all surprised? We're only human, we're all flawed.

JS: People are denied the right to be people. We're denied the right to be human beings, aren't we, by this unspoken rule of purity culture, I suppose, which is really infected our modern time that you have to be worthy of compassion because you're pure in some way that somebody's projecting on you? Yeah, absolutely.

BG: Yeah, I 100% agree. And if any other people were subjected to the same oppression, let's say the English had some, I don't know, flaw in their curing system, I'm sure they will react the same way. They'll revolt. Do you know what I mean? If you're subjected to pressure and occupation, you will fight back. You will.

JS: Absolutely. Where do you see your editing journey heading, or you through your work heading? Where do you want to go with this? Do you have a sense of your journey moving forward now? Or is this occupying you a lot of your space?

BG: I mean, the editing journey has been a learning curve for me as well. Like I said, like with both intros, I had to do a lot of research, and I learned so much about my own history doing them. And it would be—I would hope that there would be more books to come out. But the way that both those books have worked is they've been a reaction to something. This one definitely, even though the seed of it happened before the genocide, the genocide helped it just happen. And I feel I don't want this to be the end of it. There's nothing in—there's no plans at the moment for me as an editor. There are more Palestine books. There's one more Palestinian book coming out with Comma soon, but I'm not editing it. My work with Comma is to oversee Palestinian projects and Arabic projects. So, I will be involved in them, but I don't see any—there's nothing in the pipeline for me at the moment as an editor, but I hope this is not the end of it.

JS: In one of the stories, it may be the one that's like the analogue of the Hind Rajab story, somebody asked somebody else, 'How dare you get married while all this is going on. Why don't we just wait a few more days?' And reading that made me realise

how important it is to get married, even though – I won't give anything away about the story – reading that, I'm reading that, and I'm thinking to myself, *even if you're only married for one day, you have to be married*. Even if you—you have to have your children, you have to get married, you have to have family, you have to do the human things. Otherwise, you're stripped of everything, aren't you?

BG: People are getting married in the displacement camps. And in the first Intifada, which is when I was a child and teenager, people would get married. There'd be strikes and curfews, and people would get married in their flats. Everyone would sneak into the house, and they'd have a quick party, and that's it, they're married. Not to sound like a cliché, but existence is resistance in a way, in that context. And you just have to keep going. And marriage, Palestinians, they find a way to just—because we're so used to all of this, we find a way to keep going. We find a way to keep going because otherwise we'll never do anything. Because we're continually being bombed and occupied, there's curfews, there's strikes, we can't just stop every time something like this happens or we'll never do anything. I used to get bombed at night and go to uni and have a calculus exam in the morning and just—nothing. It's just how—

JS: You have to live.

BG: You have to. You have to. You just find a way to cope. It's not—it shouldn't be the way. This shouldn't be an excuse for people to say, 'Well, yeah, fine, Palestinians can deal with it.' But that is what we do.

JS: Absolutely. One of the stories says you can only be killed once [laughs]. That really struck me, actually. And these ghosts or these spirits are pushing forward. They're like, 'Well, we can only die once, you know, and we're dead already, so we will live as it were.'

BG: That's Mazen's story.

JS: Just to close out, because as you say, there's a lack of knowledge about Palestine – it just doesn't have to be Palestine, though, that we're talking about – I'd love it if you would share with us three books that you love.

BG: Three?

JS: Yeah. Three books that you love that don't necessarily have to be connected to Palestine, but if you wanted to recommend a Palestinian author and a couple of other authors you love. Because I'm always—I always want to know who to read, what to read.

BG: Yeah. Ahmed Masoud, I think, is a very strong writer. He's a Palestinian writer. I enjoy his books. He wrote a book, I think it's called *Vanished*. There's that one. Susan Abulhawa, very, very—she—all her work is just—but I think the most weirdly—the book I would recommend that for me was just very, very informative contextually, and I couldn't put it down, was Ilan Pappé's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. I would highly recommend that book. It's a heavy read, but also not so heavy because you read it and you feel, *okay, this—okay, it's all falling into place now. This all makes sense to me contextually*. So, I would recommend that the most. But Susan Abulhawa, anything by Susan Abulhawa, I think I would highly recommend.

JS: And what about a book for—a book or an author for beauty or joy in the face of all this?

BG: Beauty or joy?

JS: Yes, because we've just talked about the necessity of living.

BG: I mean, to be honest, I always secretly enjoy reading Roald Dahl. His adult stuff is pretty funny.

JS: I like Roald Dahl too, actually. He's fantastic.

BG: His adult stuff is crazy funny. I mean, there's a lot of controversy around him. I don't know. It might pass. I don't know. But Roald Dahl, definitely. There's a collection called *Switch Bitch* that I recently read, again, reread, [music] and I think that just takes you away from all the—everything. But, yeah.

[Music]

JS: Cool. Thank you so much, Basma. Thank you for talking to us.

[Music]

BG: Thank you for having me.

[Music]

Presenter: Basma Ghalayini was in conversation with John Siddique. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

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A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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